

SAINT TERESA OF JESUS
October 15, 2016

A year ago, on October 15, 2015, the celebrations of the fifth centenary of the birth of Saint Teresa were concluding. With a year's hindsight, a question spontaneously arises: have the preceding years of preparation and the year of the centenary, with all the events that occurred within it, changed anything in our lives? Personally, with all the prudence required by that question, I would say, yes: the year, or better said, those Teresian years, have almost forced us to listen to her voice anew, with that unmistakable tone born of simplicity, sincerity, and a passion for what was discovered. Let us admit it: it is difficult to remain indifferent in the face of this woman's style of communication that is capable of sounding deep chords in our hearts, our humanity, our Christian and religious being.

It is precisely this close proximity and this open trust in her, our Holy Mother, that leads us to question ourselves about the way in which we are living and witnessing to her charism. As many of you know, after the General Chapter held last year, the Order has begun rereading our Constitutions. At the moment, we are working on the chapter dedicated to prayer and communion with God. For at least the past fifty years, we have been living through a prayer crisis in our religious family. I ask myself if we are already accustomed to or resigned to living with it, to the point of not considering it a problem or difficulty that requires us to work at it on the personal and community levels. Naturally, I believe and hope it is not that way in the majority of cases, and that this crisis continues creating within us a healthy preoccupation and a need to strive harder to find that which we have not yet been able to find.

Speaking of prayer crisis, I am not only referring to infidelity to external acts of prayer. The crisis is deeper than that and touches on the motivations for and meaning of prayer, just as Saint Teresa taught us. Sometimes infidelity to prayer is justified claiming a lack of time and too many occupations. That is true in some cases and sometimes, no doubt. However, in general, I have the impression that cause and effect are being confused; that is: we prefer to fill our time with activities that seem to be evidently and truly useful. The trouble is not lack of time for prayer, but rather the time we dedicate to prayer. Let us not forget that Teresa also experienced this problem, and not for a short time, but for twenty years, during which praying was so troublesome for her that she would have preferred to endure the harshest penance instead (cf. *Life* 8,7).

In a series of meditations on prayer, Cardinal Martini speaks of three phases or states of prayer: spontaneous prayer, laborious prayer, and prayer that is a gift of grace. In its simplicity, it seems to me to be a good point for reflection. All men, even nonbelievers, experience spontaneous prayer. Spontaneous prayer springs from the heart as a plea for help or a petition for forgiveness or an act of thanksgiving. Life seems to make itself into prayer, needing, in order to be fully alive, to unfurl itself as prayer, perhaps not even pronounced, such as simply a heartbeat or an imperceptible breath. There are experiences that open themselves and open us instinctively to an Other, an interlocutor able to embrace our pain, joy, guilt, and gratitude in all their infinity.

But prayer is not limited to only that, just as living is not only breathing and loving is not only tasting the inebriation of falling in love. The prayer that Teresa talks about is not only that of “childhood” (*Life* 3,5). It is a life of prayer and as such experiences all the fatigues and difficulties of our earthly journey. A few days ago, a brother was telling me: “But, in the last instance, prayer is a means, not an end.” I have thought about that a bit and must conclude: I am sorry, I do not agree. Prayers may be a means, but prayer, as understood by Teresa, is an end. How could it be otherwise, if prayer means taking time frequently to be alone, as with intimate friends, with Him who we know loves us (cf. *Life* 8,5)? Or if it happens “like the experience of two persons here on earth who love each other deeply and understand each other well; even without signs, just by a glance, it seems, they understand each other” (*Life* 27,10). But this, it must be said, is the third phase, prayer as gift, in which the simplicity of spontaneous prayer is revisited, albeit reinforced and founded on the solidity of a relationship of intimate, reciprocal knowledge of the other.

That is it. Between them certainly, is laborious prayer, troublesome prayer, the one that costs us. But this is also true of love: between falling in love and the peaceful, familiar confidence between old lovers, are struggles, storms, infidelities, and reconciliations. In the same way, there is always an uninterrupted dialogue that leads two people to know each other deeply, descending even into the most hidden, painful creases and wounds that are the most difficult to reveal and accept. This is the difficulty of prayer: the difficulty of faith, or better, of confidence in the other, the difficulty of believing in love, the too great love with which God has loved us, as Elizabeth of the Trinity liked to say, citing Saint Paul (cf. Eph 2,4). Someone defined Teresian prayer as a “story of friendship.” And effectively, if it is friendship, it cannot but be a story, a long story, with its lights and shadows, its dry and tired moments and those others in which we drink with full hands from the fount: nevertheless, a story which we want to live together, never without the light of his gaze, never without the consolation of his forgiveness.